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**Ballad of the Mari Lwyd
and other poems**

BALLAD OF
THE MARI LWYD
and other poems

by
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The Collier

When I was born on Amman hill
A dark bird crossed the sun.
Sharp on the floor the shadow fell,
I was the youngest son.

And when I went to the County School
I worked in a shaft of light.
In the wood of the desk I cut my name
Dai for Dynamite.

The tall black hills my brothers stood,
Their lessons all were done.
From the door of the school when I ran out
They frowned to watch me run

The slow grey bells they rung a chime
Surly with grief or age.
Clever or clumsy, lad or lout,
All would look for a wage.

I learnt the valley flowers' names
And the rough bark knew my knees.
I brought home trout from the river
And spotted eggs from the trees.

A coloured coat I was given to wear
Where the lights of the rough land shone.
Still jealous of my favour
The tall black hills looked on.

They dipped my coat in the blood of a kid
And they cast me down a pit,
And although I crossed with strangers
There was no way up from it.

Soon as I went from the County School
I worked in a shaft. Said Jim,
'You will get your chain of gold, my lad,
But not for a likely time.'

And one said, 'Jack was not raised up
When the wind blew out the light
Though he interpreted their dreams
And guessed their fears by night.'

And Tom, he shivered his leper's lamp
For the stain that round him grew ;
And I heard mouths pray in the after-damp
When the picks would not break through.

They changed words there in darkness
And still through my head they run,
And white on my limbs is the linen sheet
And gold on my neck the sun

Sonnet (Pit-Boy)

When sleep's propped scenery falls about the house
And dancing women vanish, quick to unmask,
The brick world wakes up, willing to espouse
The child whose parents left the empty flask.

When sleep's propped scenery falls, alarums rouse
Children of light, each to his dreaded task.
Around Laocoon and his children's brows
Strangling their violence with venom, three serpents bask.

Harnessed to mines, who shall inherit wealth?
To whom, here praying, shall pasteurized milk bring health?
What horror of dawn shall hide our born disgrace?

Torn, with torn satchel, reared in grit and filth,
His misery shows a town taken by stealth,
And all the accusing heavens in that Welsh face.

Elegy on the Heroine of Childhood

(in Memory of Pearl White)

' . . . We died in you, and offered
Sweets to the Gods. . . '

Who flung this world? What gangs proclaimed a truce,
Spinning the streets from bootlaces come loose?
What iron hoop in darkness slid
Chased by electric heels which hid
Cold faces behind pamphlets of the time?
Why was I left? What stairs had I to climb?

Four words catch hold. Dead exile, you would excite
In the red darkness, through the filtered light,
Our round, terrified eyes, when some
Demon of the rocks would come
And lock you in his house of moving walls.
You taught us first how loudly a pin falls.

From penny rows, when we began to spell,
We watched you, at the time when Arras fell,
Saw you, as in a death-ray seen,
Ride the real fear on a propped screen,
Where, through revolting brass, and darkness' bands,
Gaping, we groped with unawakened hands.

A sea-swung murmur, and a shout Like shags
Under carved gods, with sweets in cone-shaped bags,
Tucked in to-morrow's unpaid fears,
Rucked there before the unguarded years,
We watched you, doomed, drowned, daggered, hurled from
sight,

Fade from your clipped death in the tottering light.

Frantic, a blunted pattern showed you freed.
Week back to week I tread with nightmare speed,
Find the small entrance to large days,
Charging the chocolates from the trays,

Where, trailing or climbing the railing, we mobbed the dark
Of Pandemonium near Cwmdonkin Park.

Children return to mourn you. I retrace
Their steps to childhood's jealousies, a place
Of urchin hatred, shaken fists ;
I drink the poison of the mists
To see you, a clear ghost before true day,
A girl, through wrestling clothes, caps flung in play.

From school's spiked railings, glass-topped, cat-walked walls,
From albums strewn, the streets' strange funerals,
We run to join the queue's coiled peel
Tapering, storming the Bastille,
Tumbling, with collars torn and scattered ties,
To thumbscrewed terror and the sea of eyes.

Night falls. The railing on which fast we pressed
Bears you, thumb-printed, to a death unguessed,
Before the time when you should rise
Venus to adolescent eyes,
A mermaid drying from your acid bath
Catching our lechery on a flying path.

Who has not seen the falling of a star ?
Black liquorice made you bright before the War.
You glittered where the tongue was curled
Around the sweet fear of this world
Doom's serial writing sprang upon the wall
Blind with a rush of light. We saw you fall.

How near, how far, how very faintly comes
Your tempest through a tambourine of crumbs,
Whose eye by darkness sanctified,
Is brilliant with my boyhood's slide.
How silently at last the reel runs back
Through your three hundred deaths, now Death wears black.

Prime Colours

How can I praise what is not painted with
The first five colours ? That winged horse of myth
Seems now a circus horse, paid to be clever:
The ride from Bethphage will last for ever.

One man may count, with imitative hooves,
The huge, high landscape that another loves,
Empound the apocalypse, till truth is pent
To satisfy the turnstiles of a tent.

Vast libraries vault their dead, but I can trust
White dust to resurrect the moving dust,
White dust of donkeys shedding dusty loads
Where swallows' wings paint Zechariah's words.

Swift, chattering swallows, flying in cloisters cool,
See through their darting eyes the imprisoned school,
Cramped, figured scribes, distorted by possession:
The upright man is always out of fashion.

Swallows come back to their first house of mud
Knowing no wider rainbow can be made ;
And that first nest eclipsing heaven, that roof,
May find its image in an ass's hoof.

For when the garments and tree-branches strawed
The way, a child into the mountain strayed
And on the mountain-path, in heaven's eclipse,
He found a swallow's wings, an ass's steps.

And time stopped still, stopped when an ass went down
Slowly from Bethphage to that still town.
That ass, that swallow, through the window's gap
Meet in his eyes who wears the mockers' cap.

Born of that mud, innocent light he sees,
The cornerstone in crumbling masonries.
His washed eyes, marvelling, resurrect the mountain
Where love's five colours leap into light's fountain.

Griefs of the Sea

It is fitting to mourn dead sailors,
To crown the sea with some wild wreath of foam
On some steep promontory, some cornercliff of Wales
Though the deaf wave hear nothing.

It is fitting to fling off clothing,
To enter the sea with plunge of seawreaths white
Broken by limbs that love the waters, fear the stars,
Though the blind wave grope under eyes that see, limbs that
wonder,
Though the blind wave grope forward to the sand
With a greedy, silvered hand.

It is a horrible sound, the low wind's whistle
Across the seaweeds on the beach at night.
From stone to stone through hissing caves it passes
Up the curved cliff and shakes the prickly thistle
And spreads its hatred through the grasses.

In spite of that wicked sound
Of the wind that follows us like a scenting hound,
It is fitting on the curved cliff to remember the drowned,
To imagine them clearly for whom the sea no longer cares,
To deny the language of the thistle, to meet their foot-firm
tread

Across the dark-sown tares
Who were skilful and erect, magnificent types of godhead,
To resist the dogging wind, to accuse the sea-god;
Yet in that gesture of anger we must admit
We were quarrelling with a phantom unawares.

For the sea turns whose every drop is counted
And the sand turns whose every grain a holy hour-glass holds
And the weeds turn beneath the sea, the sifted life slips free,
And the wave turns surrendering from its folds
All things that are not sea, and thrown off is the spirit
By the sea, the riderless horse which they once mounted.

Old Triton Time

Old Triton Time responds to every mood:
He's the newborn who's older than the flood.
He babbles water from a dull stone tongue.
He's old and cold, and yet the water's young.
To gain him is to lose him. I have seen
Loss bind him up with lichens: he grew green.
But if my fingers touch the water cold,
He suddenly seems young, the water old.

From My Loitering

From my loitering as a child
In paving-square and field
And from my stone-still tongue
Time is unsealed.

The ages are unstrung
By water from a Triton flung
And the world finds its heart
Which was not always young.

I cannot tell what art
Set the grave spring to start
In whose old pipe and stop
Time plays no part.

But where green eyes look up,
Eyes that are blind with sun,
Uncertain fingers grope
Around the vine-leaved cup.

There little children run
And climb the singing stone
And their sweet dialect
Is learnt by none.

Shadows and leaves infect
The brooding intellect
Beneath whose tongueless wave
Those lives are wrecked

But they low music have
Winding and gold and grave.
Time's measure they can set
By light, by love.

And in the sun-thrown jet:
'Sweet moment, sweet!' and 'sweeter yet!'
Cry, make the foiled eyes clear,
The parched lips wet.

Empty Hands

O spendthrift lover, see that miser there
Putting a dunce's cap upon a mound
Because, although it holds your golden hair,
It keeps no kind of coinage underground.

Now make a cage for him, and dream his hour
Is manacled and stopped with sterile sands,
But he's a stream, a mountain and a tower,
And he, too, knows delight has empty hands.

Indolence

Count up those books whose pages you have read
Moulded by water. Wasps this paper made.
Come. You have taken tribute from the dead.
Your tribute to the quick must now be paid.

What lovelier tribute than to rest your head
Beneath this birchtree which is bound to fade ?
And watch the branches quivering by a thread
Beyond interpretation of the shade.

The Turning of the Leaves

Not yet! Do not yet touch,
Break not this branch of silver-birch,
Nor ask the stealthy river why it laves
Black roots that feed the leaves.

Ask first the flickering wren.
He will move further. Ask the rain.
No drop, though round, through that white miracle
Will sink, to be your oracle.

Not yet! Do not yet bend
Close to that root so tightly bound
Loosened by creeping waters as they run
Along the fork's rough groin.

Ask not the water yet
Why the root's tapering tendrils eat
Parched earth away that they may be
Nearer the source those fibres must obey.

Behind the bark your hands will find
No Sycorax or flying Daphne faned
And the brown ignorant water bindweed breeds
Not caring there what brows it braids.

Light in the branches weaves.
Hard is the waiting moment while it waves,
This tree whose trunk curves upward from the stream
Where faltering ripples strum.

See how it hangs in air.
The leaves are turning now. We cannot hear
The death and birth of life. But that disguise,
Look up now, softly: break it with your eyes.

The Sunbather

Inert he lies on the saltgold sand
And sees through his lids the scarlet sky.
The sea will run back if he breathes a sigh.
He can hide the sun with a roselit hand.

Loitering, he crossed the shingle-shore
Where his eyes looked back at the glint of shells.
With a quoit of stone he startled the bells
That sleep in the rocks' vibrating core.

Thought-blind to the chosen place he passed.
The seagulls rose, and circled, and dropped;
And there, throwing down his coat, he stopped.
He, touching the mould of the world, lies fast

The noon-sun dodges around his knee.
The sand at his head now trembles pale.
The wind at his temples carries a tale
And before him flies the bewildered sea.

The sun, the sea and the wind are three
But he narrows them down with a dreaming eye.
With his hands at rest and his drawn-up thigh
He can imagine the sacred tree.

For a point of light has seeded all
And the beautiful seed has come to rest
For a sunblown moment in his breast,
A tree where the leaves will never fall

'Come back. You were with us ages ago.
We have thrown your bones to the carrion gull.
To the dripping cave we have sold your skull,
And the delicate flower which was born to blow
Is lost in the flow of the marble sea.
We have made seaweeds out of your locks,
And your star-white bones in the vaulted rocks
Lie broken and cold, like shells in the scree.'

So Shades converse, and the world's dumb thud
Muffles their argument, Man, more strong,
Gives, to console their frightened song,
The beat that consoles them most, his blood.

Sycamore

O, I am green and fair:
Is there a fairer tree?
Who is it underneath
Sleeps the sleep of death?
There is no answer there.
There is no answer there.

Centuries made me firm.
Far I have spread my roots.
I grip the flying stream.
Aching, I drop my fruits.
Who is it sleeps below?
Who is it sleeps below?

My wood made long ago
Lutes of true, hollow sound.
Lovers still carve them out
Above this burial mound.
Who is it sleeps below?
Who is it sleeps below?

Who sleeps? The young streams feed
My boughs. The blind keys spin.
Hark, he is dead indeed.
Never shall fall again
My natural, winged seed
On this small-statured man.

The Room of Pity

(to Dylan Thomas)

The room of pity, marked with murder's cross,
Danced in the worlds of reawakened tears
Sprung from grief's heart, emblems of utter loss.

Love climbed there sobbing, but this Nazarene
Leaned on the beams which rafted hopes and fears:
This was love's source, and this, grief's evergreen.

Life withered back to water from a rock.
Steps in the court still wrung that stone for blood:
A knot of murmuring voices, then the knock.

God's heart beat seconds where there was no clock,
Nor felt those hands which nailed him to the rood,
Nor heard the denial cried by Peter's cock.

But Mary, Mary Magdalen, and they
Whom Sorrow chose, who never shall be old,
Marvelled the world could shake so, and still stay;

Till the last cry rent wide the temple struck
And showed blind ignorance running to a mould,
The soldiers' god, the wolf that gave them suck.

Yeats' Tower

Surely the finger of God that governs the stars
And feels the flashed mystery of the moving world
Stirring the water to leaves in fold on fold,
Now touches this, this long grass in the field:
O under grass, O under grass, the secret.

Surely the seed that stirs beneath this touch
Hears in its ear the wand within the wind,
The miraculous fire from which all years have waned.
This, if it moves, must heal the martyr's wound:
O under grass, O under grass, the secret.

Surely from this the snow-white blood is blown;
Gold marguerite's doom that never comes, comes soon.
Dead saints, white clouds, they stop not near the shrine
But cross the skeleton harp, the unplucked bone:
O under grass, O under grass, the secret.

Ivy entwined about the walls of pride
Clings, where the tales of time in centuried scrawl
Compass the delicate mind, the hand of skill
Touching this fire which never formed a school:
O under grass, O under grass, the secret.

The wired walls hold a castle of desertion.
Already round the gate the nettle springs.
Old, wily murmurs have usurped those songs.
Sheer over this the kestrel ruin hangs:
O under grass, O under grass, the secret.

Children pass by for whom a bell has chimed.
Hunters pass by: for these a bell has tolled.
Horns echo backward, but the tower deep-welled
Hangs in the stream with all its woven scroll:
O under grass, O under grass, the secret.

After Sunset

Deep darkness—O delight!
The new-seen stars!
Ideas at twilight:
'In Vishnu-land what Avatars?'

Out to swift spaces come!
Lift up your eyelids.
Leave the broken column,
The crumbled Parthenon, the pyramids.

Leave the cave drawing,
The grey, the granite rose,
The Arabian phoenix-wing,
Tombs of the Pharaohs.

Leave, where bats dwell
And the dark bird of night,
The Grecian temple.
Look up to stars milkwhite.

Forget—sky-foundered, dumb—
The figured frieze,
Marble from Sunium
And the three Destinies

We pushed keels from dark shores,
Storm-red the sky.
Harpies calling the sailors
Strewed on the winds their cry.

Dark sailors, men
Bent on the powerful oar
Dreading the Siren,
Equipped with ropes, earwax, anchor.

Lost in a shell of the sea
Sea-myths. Isles of acorns.
The wine of Circe
The red-mouthed Tritons' horns.

Heard from the lip of the shell
Cruelty, savagery,
And shipwreck terrible,
The returning story.

In the air the legend,
Over the sea the myth,
The setting-forth, the end,
The travail, the zenith

Phoenicians bring
News from beyond the spray.
Pattern of darkness moving,
It takes the breath away.

The midsea stirring,
The immane sky a mask,
Watching the lucky wing
From wines, wares, damask.

Birds of augury
Faint in the mist.
The seawaves two and three
Where night is darkest

And who knows yet
Over the prow far-pushed
Crescent through violet
What fates are ambushed?

The myth changes. New forms
Trouble the waters' face.
Sky-skeins of the Norns
Cross and recross the surface.

The low winds sing
And the wings sway.
Pattern of darkness moving,
It takes the breath away.

Where great sails fling
Black hawk-wings to the crest
Lust of the Viking
Swoops with a bird's unrest.

Chained to the bench
Slaves in the galley row
Feeling sea's death-wrench
Up dawn's white furrow.

The seawaves swift and slow.
The churn of brightness.
The returning swallow.
The search for land. The guess.

Stars new—all myths abandoned—
True points in heaven.
The constellations conned
By a new age, new men.

Night's hush by needle parted.
Myth's marionettes
Cutting the strings of dread
Map the winds' trumpets.

Their sails in shore
To sharp points furled,
Explorers at anchor.
Curved sea-line, the suspended world.

The water's fickle smile
The carved Sibyl.
The myth in exile
Killed by the starry wheel.

Blue-cold the dolphin
Under the wave reclines
Though firm these win
The fair world's outlines.

And still Odysseus
Cresting those hate-white seas ;
Wind-carried words profuse,
Sibylline imageries.

Meanwhile what timbers swished
By hostile swell.
What good hands perished
Far from fear's oracle.

Dusk. Grief of the Gods!
Titans the mind imagined
In awful synods.
Gold lightning in the wind.

Supernatural wrath
The far-blown clarion.
Accurst Harisuth.
The downfall of Hyperion.

And far beyond
The saga-laden sea,
Visionless diamond,
The sandgrains of infancy.

There is laid no track
For the nomad here
All things haunt back
To a more ancient order.

Then flows the demi-urge
Out of his hungry side
Restless as sea-surge,
Cries out across the tide :

O life, my mistress,
This moment reclaims you
From the proud figured dress
Of time's imagery.

The Fountain

Centuries, years, barbarian, scorned by schools,
Mellowing while minute-glasses caught their sands,
From sextant, compass far, from creeds and rules,
Water, like tears, has fallen through these hands.

Beyond the merry world of rocking tables
What wonder winking from the golden cup
Lit on a leaning star the fire of fables?
What swallows crossed when pupils' eyes looked up?

Lichens may thrive where once my sculptor's eyes
Weaned the sweet changeling from the nerveless stone.
No skill from books will read my mermaid's eyes.
Fingers that seek my touch must find their own.

Driven by the screed, worn still, like wave-torn pebbles,
Men may look years on me and still see nought.
Beyond the scriveners' world of working tables
I, going empty, mock the gifts they brought.

Say nothing; or say this: No time ago
Ran past me, singing of the land and sea,
One who was brilliant as the broken snow,
And springing sunward, left her ghost in me.

The Age-Changers

Swear by no god. Call not
Youth hot, age cold. Be as the Cariatids
Alert. The sea is theirs ; and through their lids
Light breaks. Their fingers feel the tides.

Sink in the well of dust.
Ah think: the skeletons of leaves have rest.
A mad sea rages through the bud encased.
The blind winds whirl ; that whirlpool trust.

Do not look back. The track
Of vertical terror's questing shadow runs
Figure to figure, vainly seeking one
Dropped here in marble from the sun.

Notes through the pipe run back.
A knot of rivers ; wound within that knot
Mute wonder through the sweet, blind eyes looks out,
Starts the sun's memories life forgot.

Diamonds, thundering diamonds
Drop on the speechless lip. The wands of winds
Steady the cataract's pulse. Your hands
Touch under still stone whirling sands.

Time, by those dolphins' eyes, those hands,
Held ever still, the fountain grains deny,
Holding the fan-tailed rivers as they fly,
Shrinks to one drop, one dolphin's eye.

Distance outrun by toil!
Coiled from oracular, silence-bearing sides,
Babbles the fountain. Light through downcast lids
Is rising, where one drop of light decides.

Two Decisions

I must go back to Winter,
The dark, confiding tree,
The sunflower's eaten centre
That waved so tenderly;
Go back, break fellowship
With bud and leaf,
Break the loud branch and strip
The stillborn grief.
I must restore the thorn,
The naked sentinel,
Call lash of hail, wind-scorn
To laughter's lintel;
End argument in a way
Sudden and swift,
Leave stillness, go away
Beyond this leaf-drift,
Leave the ten-windowed house
And merely remark,
The ivy grew too close:
That house was dark.

Then I look out:
Rut, road and hill I see.
Tracks turn about.
Winter must come to me.
I shall not go,
I shall wait here
Until the snow
Bury the old year,
Until the swallows are gone
And the lintels wet
Tell that the rain that has blown
Is blowing yet.
Let me be nowhere
A melodramatic guest

Since here as anywhere
The light is best.
Though distant things entreat
The afraid, the fanciful,
The near is faithful:
Do not deny it.

Portrait of a Friend

He has sent me this
Late and early page
Caught in the emphasis
Of last night's cartonnage,
Crumpled in the post,
Bringing to lamplight
Breath's abatement,
Over- and under-statement,
Mute as a mummy's pamphlet
Long cherished by a ghost.

Who for annunciation has
The white wings of the sheldrake,
Labouring water's praise,
The blind shriek of the mandrake,
Broken shells for story,
Torn earth for love's near head
Raised from time's estuary,
Fed by the raven's bread;
A trespasser in tombs,
He bids the grey dust fall,
Groans in the shaping limbs:
'All stars are in my shawl.'
Who feels the deathbound sighs,
Mocks the Winged Horse's fake,
Toiling, as with closed eyes,
Love's language to remake,
To draw from their dumb wall
The saints to a worldly brothel
That a sinner's tongue may toll
And call the place Bethel.

Trusting a creaking house,
His roof is ruinous,
So mortal. A real wind
Beats on this house of sand

Two tides like ages buffet.
The superhuman, crowned
Saints must enter this drowned
Tide-race of the mind
To guess or understand
The face of this cracked prophet,
Which from its patient pall
I slowly take,
Drop the envelope,
Compel his disturbing shape,
And write these words on a wall
Maybe for a third man's sake.

A Prayer against Time

God, let me not know grief
Where time is uppermost,
Not though it handle me
More wretchedly than all;
That were to give a thief
Tears that I owe to Thee.
Take all I shall have lost:
Where the curls fall, they fall.

Delicate thoughts I love,
Thoughts of great secrecy;
Sweet vigour now I have
For the ingenious leaf.
Thought into shape I shove.
Seeds in the silent grave
Contain the breathing tree;
Keep fast this dumb belief:

We approach youth in death,
The ecstatic dance in age.
Youth is itself infirm
Until those sightless eyes
Rarify youth and breath;
Then the miraculous form
Casts out a dying sage:
Always another dies.

I have been luckier than
All others in one thing,
Devoted secret time
To one love, one alone;
Found then that dying man
Exulting in new rhyme:
The river standing,
All but miracle gone.

The Dead Words

So flies love's meteor to her shroud of winds.
The crisp words couch in their last battling-place
Where widowed silence, threaded like black lace,
Held a dumb minute, stabs the dark like pins.
It is so breathless. There the flower begins
To seed, we know not how. There blows the race
Of spirits, and they watch the stiff leaves brace
With last look backward to the town of sins.
There clenches the close fist through wreath and wraith
The sooted page where wrought like golden wire
The sly words glitter with an angel's breath;
Love's moistening seal is mastered there entire,
And the wind proves, where they are dressed for death,
Cinders are priestlike in their tale of fire.

The Keen Shy Flame

The keen shy flame holding this poem's ash,
Texture and syllable,
Bears on its point the precious crucible
Transforming utterance to a breath more rash.

Silence is there within the flying bowl
Bright as a waving poppy.
Still from the ignorant pattern falls the copy.
That pivot has all time in its control.

Once through the mummy-cloth it wound its way;
Through music, myrrh and gold
And sacred parchment's wrinkled sounds of mould
Its violet fingers clasped the sleeping clay.

It could not wake the dead lips white and dry
Nor give time's pictures back,
Nor yet release the mute hands gloved in black,
So great a thrall had conquered their last cry.

This in the censer swinging gave forth smoke
And ground the pilgrims' fire;
Silently weeping near the saints' dumb choir
This in the taper gave dark grief a cloak.

Fire-fingers crawling through this last white page
Have played such harps of bone.
Through that black graveyard what faint feet are gone
Where soul puts off the cerements of age.

The Mummy

His eyes are closed. They are closed. His eyes are closed.
His hands are clenched. They are clenched. His hands are
clenched.

The messenger comes. The letters are disciplined ; they are
disposed.

The black light quivers. Earth on Earth is avenged.

What has left music fast in the sockets of bone ?

Had all been pattern, images sight had seen,

Blood would lie quiet, but something strokes the light, and a
groan

Of great-rooted calm repels those images : nothing they mean.

Nothing here lives but the music in the eyes.

Hunting-scene, warriors, chariot, palm and wing

Bid the blood rest, thought perch where the time-bird sings or
flies,

Year chasing year, following and following.

But tears wash these bones where parchments whisper to sand.

Here a laid vase offers the flying stream.

Sand darkening wakes a harp-string hidden, plucked by a blind
hand,

Crying this theme to the world, this world-surrounding theme :

Valiant, alive, his voice pursued the lands,

Ruled the white sea, held mountains in his keep.

Leave him with delicate instruments formed for delicate hands ;

In this locked room of treasures let him who chose them sleep.

I lean down, crying : 'Touch me, lay hold on my Spring,

Reach up, for I have loosened, tearing your skies,

Fountains of light, ages of listening !'

But the bound hands are folded, the fold its word denies.

What shudder of music unfulfilled vibrates ?

What draws to a dust-grain's fall most distant stars ?

In the last taper's light what shadow meditates ?
What single, athletic shape never cast on wall or vase ?

What shudder of birth and death ? What shakes me most ?
Job his Maker answering, the Stricken exclaiming 'Rejoice !'
Gripping late in the shifting moment giant Earth, making
Earth a ghost,
Who heard a great friend's death without a change of voice.

Mana

When smoke's white blooms have seeded from the bones,
When creeds of flame have crossed the sacrificial breast,
The twitching ashes wait
For those light syllables less than undertones
Murderous, immediate,
Caressing nearer than love's hand caressed,
At whose command Death runs, at whose behest
Sleep claps two stones.

Here sacred walls surround their withered guest.
Vain are tall vases and the velvet offerings;
Virtues are vain
For this whose vigil cowers, whose voice at rest
Speaks to the Slain
With Pentecostal tongues, the lightning's wings.
Perched where this lies a bird of water sings
Watching the West.

Strewn dust, left still for love's warm scatterings,
Black in the fiery centre of grief's aureoled thought,
Our palm must scatter these
Forgiven particles, like seeds in wings,
To the five seas.
Day's burial and the nails of Night have brought
This silence, and an image burnt to nought
Through light's gold rings.

Paint on this breath a flying chariot.
Carve the known relic near the unapproachable coast.
Stoop, and engrave
One afraid ship above the whirlpool's knot,
And let the wave
Leap to that life, until the deluge host
Heaven-high and falling, gather sail and ghost
Where winds are not.

What may love's language near the dead tongue trust ?
Fire steals the cherished parchment crumbling to astound
The staring dark
Stunned by true dust as by a trumpet blast
Whose point, whose spark,
Guiding God's circle where all stars are found,
Sinks to this changeling's pall, this mummer's mound,
With all the Past.

Tree of all leaves, skin of all creatures, ground
Where eyes still seek an image in the Godhead made,
Our hands have tied
What death must now undo without a sound ;
But you, the bride
Of morning, shining through the yew-tree's shade,
Hold with unique unrest, so naked laid,
Our eyes spellbound.

Earth-Dress

What shining raiments rise
Tempting the naked one
Whom the unjust skies
And the proud, bounteous sun
Use for their lasting shame ;
Whose naked sufferings write
A true redeemer's name
Who gave them their first light,
And who, to succour us,
Projects the fourfold man
Proudly anonymous,
Knowing all pride is vain.

Not impossibly may,
And when least thought upon,
A thoughtless moment stay
When all time's years are gone ;
So deep a pledge
One diamond cuts in glass,
From this close window-ledge
All books may pass,
Yet may some casual thing
Unnoticed by us
Hatch late an early wing
Chance-lit, tremulous.

Caught in the whirling spin
Of winds and days,
The snake changes its skin
And the mind its ways,
But the spirit is loyal
To what, before time stood,
Was single and royal,
Alone in multitude,

Thought and unthought.
Everything made must be
More exquisitely wrought
Than human eyes can see.

I would awaken eyes
Time has made unaware
Of wonders of world size;
But when hawk-hovering air
On the unsheltered road
Scours for divinity
The beggar and the god,
Men clutch mortality,
Cling the ruinous,
Perishing fabric of things,
To build the grave's dark house,
Terrified by those wings.

They thatch with fears and calms
Their shadowy home.
When roofless men ask alms
Of the star-shivering dome,
Winter meets them then,
Driving frost in the blood
Of passionate, naked men.
Then most they need men's good
Quarrels, rough words, kind touch,
Habitual words to say
That clothe the god and the wretch
With the close-knit joy of day.

Not impossibly may,
When bloodless icicles
In fossil-caves of clay
Freeze rough, kind hands that bless,
A single breath create
Out of the ruined bones

And trophies of hard Fate,
The fireless, sacred stones,
A flame so purified
That it may resurrect
From the estranging tide
All lives the Lifeless wrecked.

I know, the weariest friend
May be transfigured, may
Gloriously ascend
To the summit of glad day,
And the labyrinth he has gone
Promising no end
But death, that obvious one,
Whose sorrows none may mend
But gravestone and grave-sod,
May suddenly reveal
In the beggar and the god
The dragging, winged heel

Age, Winter, solitude
Hover, and hem him in.
But the eagle is renewed
Like gold when it grows thin.
Where clothing is cast away
The diver drops to swim
And naked in the spray
All light is worn by him.
Exulting in his youth
He tenderly sings
Though the ravages of truth
Tear him, with claws and wings.

Strike him; his strength is rougher.
Bow him, but braced, he will
Defy thought, dare to suffer
Till he has thrown his hill,

**Mole-like and eagle-like
Turning the scales of the wind,
Turning the clouds that strike
A Titan that has sinned.
Night, hell and hail are nothing
To his great heart, Earth-born,
Knowing its natural clothing
Of elemental scorn.**

Thames Forest

Years are divine rings: moments are immortal.
The months are saplings, centuries are oakenshaws.
Lightfoot the soul goes. Impressive is the shadow
Cast by those time-groves.

Darkness of the sycamore flies across the river.
From a pattern of foliage see the spirit struggling
Through meshes like memories, woven of their terror,
Wondering, emerging.

Thought, like a thread, still glitters on his fingers.
Still from the dark earth, mythical and gleaming,
Draws he the life-skein, flying ever forward,
Wound by a dead hand.

Light on the wet ground, lighter on the leafmould
Dances that energy, rising to the sunbeam.
Black flies the shadow, asking of the dead leaf
Garment for burial.

Stilled on the charmed world, upward the life looks,
Stunned by that oracle speaking from the tree's root:
'One that is strange-born, one that dies to-morrow
Dances to-day here.'

Dumb roots are whispering; light breaks in darkness;
Frail fibres grasp there, clinging to the close clod.
Under the warm green vellum of the meadow
Trance-wise the seeds break.

Light is a great pool. Look, the clouds are flying.
Of all forms living, man alone deliberate
Scrawls on a leaf the impression of his going.
These leaves are numbered.

Fate unforeseen, deformer of the branches,
Will grapple the great tree, lay it in the low field.
Out of such torment, fingers draw the Spring's
Evocative ritual.

Easily time, and quickly, can forsake him,
Leave, in a moment, intricate the shuttles
Idle, the still thread, while the mighty loom works
Suns ever turning.

Spring Song

Now the green leaves are singing,
Now the white snows are gone.
Sparkling, the water leaps
Over the stones, runs on:
Darkness holds my steps.

Straight to the upland furrow
The labourer keeps the plough.
The sharp knives turn the mould.
Where earth lies naked now
Clay can divine no sorrow
The winds have not made cold.

Across our silver morning
The swallows are returning;
The blue light of the sea
Already in the sky
Is knife-edged with their wings.

And have they crossed
The Capricorn of air?
Broken the seeming-lost
Autumn of despair,
Found no new light deceiving,
Yet found the first light wise?

I saw them leaving,
Heard their chattering cries;
I fast and thirst,
Unsatisfied, believing
My Spring was first,

That filled my eyes,
Made my cheeks wet,
When first I broke disguise,
Walking with one who gave
Words from the grave,
A song no birds repeat.

Autumn Song

Sycamores must fade,
Yellow acorns be lost,
Before this ghost be laid
In earth, in frost.

Then will this Jack of green
With mouth of leaves, this mummer
Be no more seen,
Sunk with the Summer.

Though now the stops he shuts
With minstrelsy
Slant eyes of buried nuts
Can hardly see,

Then shall his hands be taught.
Hush, he'll forget
How the blue sloes were caught
In grasses wet.

And here, where meet
The lines of heart and head,
Where softest words are sweet,
Words for the dead,

His cap of light, his bells
Shall faded play
Among the broken shells
In disarray.

The Shooting of Werfel

'Werfel has been shot in Paris.'—(*Newspaper Report.*)

Werfel dead? Hark. The forest is empty.
The myth of light, the lithe, fortuitous shadow
Is changed to dust, to a whirl of rustling leaves.
Winter hovers above the shivering seed.

His early words creep back through the crisp, dead leaves;
'As great you are as death looks little before you';
'What sweeter joy on Earth than be wounded and say nothing!'
—Werfel, who sought in each the return of the Saviour.

Dead. Dead. A voice from the skull's great cavern
Breathes, 'I forgive you. Forget me. This is Werfel.'
Will the woman carrying the bag pause, will the child turn
from his game?
Yet his stopped heart is here, a magnet for silence.

Werfel in exile under the huge, inhuman wheels, caressing the
curled
Frail leaf, so different from Rilke's that is like the skin of a pear,
Listening to the trunks of trees in the forest of evocation,
Werfel who knew the colour of the leaves, their falling.

How all his words followed an unknown needle!
He was drawn to the unborn from tyranny, persecution,
Driven from Prague, Vienna,
At last to Paris, the place of Heine's exile.

Found there in Paris, in a corner, alone with all ages,
Child of infinite space with the ages in his hand:
They will kill you, child, with a rifle-butt.
Arise. Shine. They will shoot you through the eyes.

O God, the atom has split in Werfel's brain!
The room is rigid with the death of his brain.
O small, diminished wall of their jealous fury
Propping the chaste stars of his huge horizons!

Ah calculating bullets against the artist
Driven from the shoulder, piercing blind windows
Draped from night's terror of whirling, flaming wheels,
They have struck: the lamp is a skull.

Killed. Now clash the unbelievable cymbals.
O two worlds! O clash of two worlds!
They have bandaged their own eyes. Rigid with ecstasy
They leave him, bleeding to death on the god-stained ground.

Their minds had returned to iron forms, but he had put forth
Antlers, like those invisible ones of Moses,
His lofty forehead, his eyes
Beautiful as a stag's that see no dogs for the god.

'That once this life was mine! That once this life was mine!
That once those pines stood up in my blood's meadows!
That once this life was mine!' Forget him, deformed shadows,
Reel back from him. The dust is drinking wine.

Stone Footing

Stopping my ears to Venus and her doves,
I steal stone footing, find death's carved decree ;
I choose this path, the rock which no man loves
Familiar to birds, cast by a barren sea.
Cold on this ridge among the breeding winds,
Starved in the famine forced by Adam's rib,
Here I hold breath, knowing the door of my friends
Is rock, and I am exiled from their tribe.
I put my ear to the ground, I plant my foot
Against grey rock, but wind and seawave smother
The stone's coiled fossil-saga ; this navel-knot
Fastens my moving to the great rock-mother.
I would unchain them ; but there flies that other
Bearing the sea, and kills me with her shot.

Atlas on Grass

Atlas on grass, I hold the moving year.
I pull the compass to a point unguessed.
Vast midnight flies to morning in the breast,
All moves to movement, moves and makes a sphere
Rough Winter loosens leaves long-veined with fear,
Then the seed moves to its unsleeping rest.
Faith springs where beads of longing lie confessed.
Time lost is found; the salmon leaps the weir.
Death stops the mouths of graves, is coverer
Shrouding and hiding what the pulse reveals,
But he, too, moves to his Deliverer;
Judgment will never stop the dancer's heels.
What's gone forever is forever here,
And men are raised by what a myth conceals.

Sonnet (Infant Noah)

Calm the boy sleeps, though death is in the clouds.
Smiling he sleeps, and dreams of that tall ship
Moored near the dead stars and the moon in shrouds,
Built out of light, whose faith his hands equip.
It was imagined when remorse of making
Winged the bent, brooding brows of God in doubt.
All distances were narrowed to his waking:
'I built his city, then I cast him out.'
Time's great tide falls; under that tide the sands
Turn, and the world is shown there thousand-hilled
To the opening, ageless eyes On eyelids, hands,
Falls a dove's shade, God's cloud, a velvet leaf.
And his shut eyes hold heaven in their dark sheaf,
In whom the rainbow's covenant is fulfilled.

A Lover's Words

Come down, dear love, be quick.
Now must our limbs' great follies
Fly through the zodiac
Where colts race with fillies.
Night, and the light-shafts fly.
Noon, and the stars are thick.
Naked through Earth and Sky
Come down, and hurl time back.

Tell the sun to rise.
Tell all the birds to sing.
Then cover the brightening skies
With a tented covering,
That under the sheet awake
The naked limbs flying
Bend, till the axle break,
All but their true lying.

Dive, sun, through my hand,
And pull the waters after ;
Spin the whirling land
In a silkworm's darkness, softer
Than light, a luminous net,
That we, with meteors' arms
Far under the coverlet
May wind the winds and storms.

Beautiful head, lie still.
Light beats the pillows.
The cock crows, shrill:
That cry no lover follows.
Shining with glow-worms' light
We shape the world to our will,
Twined, hidden from sight
With blind-moles under the hill.

Three Epitaphs

1. The Miser

All things he spared, except his rod, and words ;
The beggars knew his house, but not the birds ;
For once his careless housemaid dropped a crumb,
False augury of barren years to come.

2. The Touch-Typist

Brought from time's glare and the electric bracket,
Her eyes close under yews and cypress-trees.
Bless, in these files where silence tells a packet,
Blind fingers, eyes which never saw the keys.

3. In Memory of Elizabeth Corbet Yeats

She drew his lightning to the needle's eye.
Now that the work is done, the last book bound,
The pains she took are quietly laid by,
The point in Earth's heart, lest a trumpet sound.

The Safe Soul

Shall soul wear thin with passion like a ring
Of beaten gold, or like an eagle's claw
Grow fine? Shall he become the winds' first king,
And tell the afraid rock-children what he saw?

Shall he discern the writing-room he left,
Wrought with strange books and stories edged with gold?
Shall he look down, a king above his cleft,
Hurled from pure heaven, and see the world unfold?

Shall he ascend in dews of morning's haze
Dispersed in atoms, starry-worlded airs,
Bright points on the capricious water-blaze,
Or under sea burn lamps of midnight fairs?

Shall soul, passed through so many golden rings
Nearer the heart's thread and the finger old,
Sleep, as an eagle sleeps on widespread wings,
When blind dawn deluges the world in gold?

Shall he, like Dante in his course of love,
Climb to the place where eagles cannot look,
Drink the clear stream, or with Cocytus move
Under the world, where lies the greatest book?

Shall he be pierced to death by cruel eyes,
Love's mistress with the vampire's ecstasy,
Fall to the malice of his enemies,
Or curse the cold moon by an exile's sea?

Shall soul teach stillness to become more still
As ancient pitchers do, that some dead hand
So shaped that none can fathom their dead will
Or penetrate the aura where they stand?

Shall soul fall softly like the one dead bloom
Too light for human ears, or like a wave
Thunder through rocks of adamantine doom
Binding love's two dreads to a single grave?

All demons scorn, but man was born to bear,
Where two great passions meet, the spark and shock.
Stone-like the eagle drops, his heart is there ;
Stone-like he drops ; he hears his great heart knock.

Stone-like the eagle drops, shakes off the air
Of murderous winds, of storms that tower and mock,
Safe. Though his plumage glitters for despair,
All that he loves lies naked in the rock.

The Eastern Window

How came that grief
At break of day when time's first characters
Made real the silks of camphored elegy ?
When white hands laid an echo on our ears
Of ghostly burials in the years to be ?
When, past the sighing shutters, first there filed
Those men of history with iron spades ?
What thread was hid when fingers of a child
Pulled from white stars the curtains of the shades ?

A night full-starred
Lent to the curtain-folds a scent of shrouds,
The constant heavens exciting mortal lips
To match Earth's memories to the moving clouds.
Then from the night the nursery in eclipse
Learnt superstition while the head was still ;
Then ageless leaves first found their roots in graves
While a cold moon with stark, magnetic will
Sucked through the trees the blind, unerring waves.

God rose from this,
Shook once the hewn foundations of the world,
Earthquakes, volcanoes, and the bell-like sea ;
His marl-made Adam into chaos hurled,
Left grief a mammoth on the spiny scree.
Through dawn's bright threads, the sundered veil, I see
Four legends meeting where the four lives cross.
O birth, that fourfold waking streamed to me
Fairer than Earth, and softer than green moss.

A rainbow's sheaf
Shone, then was gone, was lost, then shone again,
A rending brightness from the brandished arc
Where lashes fast evoked a goddess plain
Against that rock's inertia in the dark.

Love's foundered figurehead, her harp unstrung,
Dumb as Leviathan, fulfilled a frieze.
I saw, through shuddering colours, lit, made young,
Her living hand take up the ringing seas.

Waking from sleep,
As from a shell with all the lights of chance,
I sprang to find the dazzling water-fleece,
A film of sound carrying the waters' dance
To the miraculous ear, the navel's peace
From nerveless rock wrenching the blood's bright way,
The luminous involutions of the fall
Commingle mortal with immortal day,
Tracked with beasts', birds', and fishes' ritual.

A mountain rose ;
About its slopes were listening people spread.
They who looked up could see behind God's words
Distance transfigured while He broke the bread.
He cleansed the temple with a scourge of cords,
Stopped, while the woman touched His garment's hem,
Raised the dead, saved the adulterous, and revealed
Light to the blind. Being love, He died for them,
Whose resurrection by His blood was sealed.

From rock and wrong
First grief uncoils, ascending like a flower,
Climbs from dark music to the stonecropped land,
Climbs from killed music to the prisoner's tower
Scrawled with a diamond while the glass held sand.
I saw from dumb looms where the blind Shades keep
Their crooked shuttles whence all patterns run,
Cast like a vision from the coil of sleep,
Breath fly, and love's born hands surround the sun.

The Mother and Child

Let hands be about him white, O his mother's first,
Who caught him, fallen from light through nine months'
haste

Of darkness, hid in the worshipping womb, the chaste
Thought of the creature with its certain thirst.
Looking up to her eyes declined that make her fair
He kicks and strikes for joy, reaching for those dumb springs.
He climbs her, sinks, and his mouth under darkness clings
To the night-surrounded milk in the fire of her hair.

She drops her arm, and, feeling the fruit of his lips,
Tends him cunningly. O what secrets are set
In the tomb of each breath, where a world of light in eclipse
Of a darkly worshipping world exults in the joy she gave
Knowing that miracle, miracle to beget,
Springs like a star to her milk, is not for the grave.

Discoveries

The poles are flying where the two eyes set:
America has not found Columbus yet.

Ptolemy's planets, playing fast and loose,
Foretell the wisdom of Copernicus.

Dante calls Primum Mobile, the First Cause:
'Love that moves the world and the other stars '

Great Galileo, twisted by the rack,
Groans the bright sun from heaven, then breathes it back.

Blake, on the world alighting, holds the skies,
And all the stars shine down through human eyes.

Donne sees those stars, yet will not let them lie:
'We're tapers, too, and at our own cost die.'

The shroud-lamp catches. Lips are smiling there.
'Les flammes—déjà?'—The world dies, or Voltaire.

Swift, a cold mourner at his burial-rite,
Burns to the world's heart like a meteorite.

Beethoven deaf, in deafness hearing all,
Unwinds all music from sound's funeral.

Three prophets fall, the litter of one night:
Blind Milton gazes in fixed deeps of light

Beggar of those Minute Particulars,
Yeats lights again the turmoil of the stars.

Motionless motion! Come, Tiresias,
The eternal flies, what's passing cannot pass.

'Solace in flight,' old Heraclitus cries;
Light changing to Von Hügel's butterflies.

Rilke bears all, thinks like a tree, believes,
Sinks in the hand that bears the falling leaves.

The stars! The signs! Great Angelo hurls them back.
His whirling ceiling draws the zodiac.

The pulse of Keats testing the axiom;
The second music when the sound is dumb.

The Christian Paradox, bringing its great reward
By loss; the moment known to Kierkegaard.

Ballad of the Mari Lwyd

Ballad of the Mari Lwyd

PROLOGUE

(Spoken by the Announcer of the Ballad)

Mari Lwyd, Horse of Frost, Star-horse, and White Horse of the Sea, is carried to us.

The Dead return.

Those Exiles carry her, they who seem holy and have put on corruption, they who seem corrupt and have put on holiness.

They strain against the door.

They strain towards the fire which fosters and warms the Living.

The Living, who have cast them out, from their own fear, from their own fear of themselves, into the outer loneliness of death, rejected them, and cast them out for ever:

The Living cringe and warm themselves at the fire, shrinking from that loneliness, that singleness of heart.

The Living are defended by the rich warmth of the flames which keeps that loneliness out.

Terrified, they hear the Dead tapping at the panes, then they rise up, armed with the warmth of firelight, and the condition of scorn.

It is New Year's Night.

Midnight is burning like a taper. In an hour, in less than an hour, it will be blown out.

It is the moment of conscience.

The living moment.

The dead moment.

Listen.

(Pitchblack Darkness—A Long Table laid with a White Cloth—A Door on Stage Right—A Broad Window next to it—The Two Loads of a Pendulum—When light comes it is so contrived as to throw their shadows to the extreme ends of the room—Between these ends stylistic figures whose movements exaggerate human movements—A Skull may be suggested at one shadow-limit of the Pendulum, and a Fillet at the other.)

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Now dead men rise in the frost of the stars
And fists on the coffins knock.
They dropped in their graves without one sound;
Then they were steady and stiff.
But now they tear through the frost of the ground
As heretic, drunkard and thief.

Why should you fear though they might pass
Ripping the stitch of grief,
The white sheet under the frosted glass,
Crisp and still as a leaf?
Or look through sockets that once were eyes
At the table and white cloth spread?
The terrible, picklock Charities
Raised the erected dead.

Under your walls they gnaw like mice;
Virtue is unmasked.
The hands of the clock betray your vice.
They give what none has asked.
For they have burrowed beneath the graves
And found what the good gave most:
Refuse cast by the righteous waves
In fossil, wraith and ghost.

Chalice and Wafer. Wine and Bread.
And the picklock, picklock, picklock tread.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Good men gone are evil become
And the men that you nailed down
Clamped in darkness, clamour for rum,
And ravish on beds of down
The vision your light denied them, laid
Above the neglected door;
And the chattering speech of skull and spade
Beckons the banished Poor.

Locked-out lepers with haloes come.
Put out the clock: the clock is dumb.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

The breath of a numb thing, loud and faint:
Something found and lost.
The minute drops in the minute-glass;
Conscience counts the cost.
What mounted, murderous thing goes past
The room of Pentecost?
Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:
A horse's head in the frost.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.
What shudders free from the shroud so white
Stretched by the hands of the clock?
What is the sweat that springs in the hair?
Why do the knee-joints knock?
Bones of the night, in the naked air,
Knock, and you hear that knock.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

A knock of the sands on the glass of the grave,
A knock on the sands of the shore,
A knock of the horse's head of the wave,
A beggar's knock on the door.
A knock of a moth on the pane of light,
In the beat of the blood a knock.
Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

The sands in the glass, the shrinking sands,
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

Midnight Midnight. Midnight. Midnight
Hark at the hands of the clock.

{ *Light* }

Figures

Fasten the yard-gate, bolt the door,
And let the great fat drip.
The roar that we love is the frying-pan's roar
On the flames, like a floating ship.
The old Nick will keep the flies from our sheep,
The tick, the flea and the louse.
Open the flagons. Uncork the deep
Beer of this bolted house.

[*They stoop to the fire*]

One Figure

Unseen fingers are aching now
(Hark at the pendulum's chain!)
Out of the night they have pulled the Plough,
Pulled the Dead Man's Wain.
Bones of the dead are clattering, clinking,
Pulling the Plough from the shore.
Dead men's fingers are feeling, knocking,
Knocking now on the door.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Another Figure :

Crammed with food the table creaks.
The dogs grow fat on the crumbs.
God bless our board that springs no leaks,
And here no ruffian comes,
No beggars itching with jackdaws' eyes,
No fox on the trail of food,
No man with the plague from Hangman's Rise,
No jay from Dead Man's Wood.

Chalice and wafer that blessed the dead,
And the picklock, picklock, picklock tread.

Midnight Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Third Figure

Bones of the dead should come on their knees
Under a pilgrim's cloak,
But out in the dark what devils are these
That have smelt our kitchen-smoke ?
Listen. Listen. Who comes near ?
What man with a price on his head ?
What load of dice, what leak in the beer
Has pulled your steps from the dead ?

Midnight. Midnight Midnight Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'Starving we come from Gruffydd Bryn
And a great meal we have lost.
We might have stayed by the fire of the inn
Sheltered from the frost.
And there a sweet girl stood and spread
The table with good things,
Felinfoel beer with a mountain's head,
And a pheasant with hungry wings.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'There were jumping sausages, roasting pies,
And long loaves in the bin,
And a stump of Caerphilly to rest our eyes,
And a barrel rolling in.
But dry as the grave from Gruffydd Bryn
We are come without one rest ;
And now you must let our Mari in :
She must inspire your feast.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'For She knows all from the birth of the Flood
To this moment where we stand
In a terrible frost that binds the blood
In a cramp that claws the hand.
Give us rhyme for rhyme through the wood of the door
Then open the door if you fail.
Our wit is come from the seawave's roar,
The stars, and the stinging hail.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Go back. We have heard of dead men's bones
That hunger out in the air.
Jealous they break through their burial-stones,
Their white hands joined in a prayer.
They rip the seams of their proper white clothes
And with red throats parched for gin,
With buckled knuckles and bottle-necked oaths
They hammer the door of an inn.

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint :
A horse's head in the frost

'O pity us, brothers, through snow and rain
We are come from Harlech's waves.
Tall spears were laid on the mountain.
We hid in the warriors' caves.

We were afraid when the sun went down,
When the stars flashed we were afraid;
But the small lights showed us Machynlleth town,
And bent on our knees we prayed.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Though you come from the grim wave's monklike hood
And Harlech's bitter coast,
White horses need white horses' food:
We cannot feed a ghost.
Cast your Lwyd to the white spray's crest
That pounds and rides the air.
Why should we break our lucky feast
For the braying of a mare?

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint.
A horse's head in the frost.

'In the black of En-gedi's cave we hid;
We hid in the Fall of the Bride.
And the stars flew back from the lifted lid,
We saw those horsemen ride.
We hid all night in the cowl of the wave;
Chariots and kings we saw
In Goliath darkness, bright and brave
Felled by an ass's jaw.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock

'O white is the starlight, white on the gate
And white on the bar of the door.
Our breath is white in the frost, our fate
Falls in the dull wave's roar.
O rhyme with us now through the keyhole's slit
And open the door if you fail.
The sea-frost, brothers, has spurred our wit,
Ay, and the killing hail'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

What thirst consumed by the leaping flames,
What thirst has brought you back
From the starry writing of holy names
The spittle of Hell turns black.
Austere star-energies, naked, white,
Roused you, but still you play
With a bottle drowned in a drunkard's night,
Brought by the wicked spray.

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint :
A horse's head in the frost.

The slinking dead, the shrinking sands,
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Hark, they are going, the footsteps shrink,
And the sea renews her cry.
The big stars stare and the small stars wink ;
The Plough goes glittering by.
It was a track of the turning tide
That brought those voices near.
Dead men pummelled the panes outside :
We caught the breath of the year

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

(Voice)

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Out in the night the nightmares ride ;
And the nightmares' hooves draw near.
Dead men pummel the panes outside,
And the living quake with fear.

Quietness stretches the pendulum's chain
To the limit where terrors start,
Where the dead and the living find again
They beat with the selfsame heart.

In the coffin-glass and the window-pane
You beat with the selfsame heart.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

(Very faint)

'We bring from white Hebron
And Ezekiel's Valley,
From the dead sea of Harlech
And mountain-girt Dolgelley,
All that singing way
From Cader to Kidwelly,
A stiff, a star-struck thing
Blown by the stinging spray
And the stinging light of the stars,
Our white, stiff thing,
Death and breath of the frost,
That has known the room of glass,
Dropped by the Milky Way
To the needle and thread of the pass.'

Hark, they are coming back, those fellows
Giving the stars another name,
Blowing them up with a pair of bellows
From a jumping, thumping, murderous flame;
Men of the night with a legion of wrongs,
Fists in the dark that shudder with shame,
Hated leathers with holy songs,
Bastard bodies that bear no name.

(Loud and near)

'We bring from Cader Idris
And those ancient valleys,

Mari of your sorrows,
Queen of the starry fillies.'

You'll not play skittles with us,
White Spirit. Spray of malice;
Froth from an old barrel:
Tell us if that be holy.

'Hers the white art that rouses
Light in the darkest palace,
Though black as a mole's burrow:
Truly we come to bless.'

You come from drunkards' houses
And bent, picklock alleys.
You come to thief or borrow:
Your starved loins poke and press.

'Great light you shall gather,
For Mari here is holy;
She saw dark thorns harrow
Your God crowned with the holly.'

Have you watched snowflakes wither?
They fasten, then fade slowly,
Hither and thither blowing:
Your words are falling still

'Deeper sadness knowing
Than death's great melancholy,
We journeyed from Calgarw,
From that skull-shaped hill.'

A white horse frozen blind,
Hurled from a seawave's hollow,
Fostered by spray and wind,
Profane and priestlike thing!

'She has those precious secrets
Known to the minstrel solely,

Experienced in the marrow,
Quick to tame beasts unruly.'

She should have been a whistle
For that tames our collie;
He darts on like an arrow,
Then he creeps up slowly.

'O, if she were a whistle
She would not call your collie,
But through this keyhole narrow
Try, your wits to rally.'

Go back to Cader Idris,
To your Dry Bones Valley.
Death shall pounce to-morrow,
And break upon your folly.

'Clustered thick are the stars,
And the fire-irons lying still;
Dust in the iron bars;
Frost on the window-sill.
The fire warms many hands,
But there where the shadows press
A single point of light
Can bring great loneliness.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'In the black of the churchyard yew we lay
And the long roots taught us much.
We groped for the sober light of day,
Light that we dared not touch.
The sleet of the stars fell cold and thin
Till we turned, and it touched our crown,
Then we yearned for the heat in the marrow of sin,
For the fire of a drinkers' town '

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:
A horse's head in the frost. .

'But brightest brimstone light on him
And burn his rafters black
That will not give when his fears are dim
The treasure found in the sack.
In the mouth of the sack, in the stifled breath,
In the sweat of the hands, in the noose,
In the black of the sack, in the night of death
Shines what you dare not lose.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'Under the womb of teeming night
Our Mari tries your faith;
And She has Charity's crown of light:
Spectre she knows and wraith;
How sweet-tongued children are wickedly born
By a swivelling devil's thrust
Mounting the night with a murderous horn,
Riding the starry gust.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock

'Under the edge of the spray of the stars,
In the hollow dark of a wave,
We heard the fire-irons stirring the bars,
Laying the ash of the grave.
We saw your faith in the pin of the tongs
Laying your fears at rest;
You buried our bones with your drinking-songs
And murdered what you love best.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. ,
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'But the pin goes in to the inmost dark
Where the dead and living meet,
And the clock is stopped by the shock of the spark
Or the stealthy patter of sleet.

Where disdain has cast to its utmost pitch
The strands of the finished thread,
The clock goes out, and the ashes twitch,
Roused by the breaking of bread.'

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:
A horse's head in the frost.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Go back, with your drowned and drunken eyes
And your crooked mouths so small
And your Mari foaled of the starry skies:
Go back to the seawave's fall.
If we lift and slide the bolt in the door
What can our warm beer buy?
What can you give for the food we store
But a slice of starving sky?

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:
A horse's head in the frost.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'O who has woven the skein of the hair,
And who has knotted the ropes of the fist,
And who has hollowed the bones of the eyes?
One of you answer: the hands have kissed.
I see in your eyes white terror,
I see in your locked hands hate.
Press, we are one step nearer
The live coals in the grate.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

The slinking dead, the shrinking sands,
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

Hark, they are going; the footsteps shrink,
And the sea renews her cry.
The big stars stare and the small stars wink;
The Plough goes glittering by.
It was a trick of the turning tide
That brought those voices near.
Dead men pummelled the panes outside:
We caught the breath of the year.

(Voice)

Dread and quiet, evil and good:
Frost in the night has mixed their blood.

Thieving and giving, good and evil:
The beggar's a saint, and the saint a devil.

Mari Lwyd, Lwyd Mari:
A sacred thing through the night they carry.

Betrayed are the living, betrayed the dead:
All are confused by a horse's head.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.
Lazarus comes in a shroud so white
Out of the hands of the clock.
While baskets are gathered of loaves of light,
Rape is picking the lock.
Hungering fingers, bones of the night,
Knock, knock, knock.

Figures:

Bones of the dead with their crooked eyes
And their crooked mouths so small,
Night-nags foaled of the starry skies,
Threatening our feast, they call.
We face the terrible masquerade
Of robbers dressed like the dead.
The cold star-energies make us afraid,
Afraid of that picklock tread.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

A starlit crucifix hits their knees
And a chain of bloodstained beads
Drops to the fork where the fingers seize
Their good and evil deeds.
Those blasphemous hands can change our mind
Or mood with a craftsman's skill ;
Under their blessing they blast and blind,
Maim, ravish, and kill.

The slinking dead, the shrinking sands,
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Resurrection's wings and corruption's moth
Beat on the window-pane.
The tombs are ripped like a table-cloth,
And madmen teach the sane.
A voice redresses those ancient wrongs
With a wrong more deep than all.
Holy Charity's bastard songs
Burst from a seawave's fall.

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint :
A horse's head in the frost.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'Hell curse this house for a badger's holt
If we find no man devout.
God singe this doorway, hinge and bolt,
If you keep our evil out.
Long-limbed we hung in the taunting trees
And cried in our great thirst
Give us a drink, light breaks our knees.
Give, or the house is cursed.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Snatch off that mask from a drinker's mouth
All lit by phosphorus up.
Men of the night, I know your drouth ;
Your mouths would blister the cup.
When the big stars stare and the small stars wink
You cry it's the break of day.
Out of our sight ; you are blind with drink :
Ride your Mari away.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'Pity our penitent fingers now
Telling the beads of a chain.
Out of the night we have pulled the Plough,
Pulled the Dead Man's Wain.
Out of the torment of huge night
Where the cruel stars are hung,
We have come with blessing to heal your sight
If first you will cool our tongue.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Go back, with your drowned and drunken eyes
And your crooked mouths so small
And your Mari foaled of the starry skies :
Go back to the seawave's fall.
If we lift and slide the bolt in the door
What can our warm beer buy ?
What can you give for the food we store
But a slice of starving sky ?

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint :
A horse's head in the frost.

'Surely, surely you'll open the door
Now that you know our sins;
For all grows good that was foul before
Where the spark of heaven begins.
Where the spark that cleaves to the chimney's groove
Is blown to the freezing weather
It is men's good that breaks their love,
Their evil draws them together.'

Chalice and Wafer, Wine and Bread.
And the picklock, picklock, picklock tread.

'Know you are one with Cain the farm
And Dai of Dowlais pit;
You have thieved with Benjamin's robber's arm,
With Delilah you lay by night.
You cheated death with Barabbas the Cross
When the dice of Hell came down.
You prayed with Jo in the prisoners' fosse
And ran about Rahab's town.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'O, had we never drunk a drop
You might receive us then,
Men of the snow-deep mountain-top
And soot-faced mining men.
Do you not hear like an anvil ring
The smith of the rock of coal
Who fell on his steel like that great king
And sundered body and soul?

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'O crouch and cringe by the bounding flame
And close your eyelids fast.
Out of the breath of the year we came.
The breath of the year has passed.

The wits of a skull are far too great
Being out of the hands of the clock.
When Mari Lwyd knocks on the door,
In charity answer that knock.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Go back. We have heard of dead men's bones
That hunger out in the air.
Jealous they break through their burial-stones,
Their white hands joined in a prayer.
They rip the seams of their proper white clothes
And with red throats parched for gin,
With buckled knuckles and bottle-necked oaths
They hammer the door of an inn.

'O a ham-bone high on a ceiling-hook
And a goose with a golden skin,
And the roaring flames of the food you cook:
For God's sake let us in!
To see the white beer rise in the glass
And the brown jump out of the jug
Would lift those stiffened loons in the grass
Like lambs to the darling dug.'

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:
A horse's head in the frost.

Go back to your Hell, there are clean souls here,
Go back to your barns of muck.
Go back to your Hell, and leave our beer,
And your Mari bring you luck.
We'll feel you with stones, we'll strip you clean
In the stars, if you're not gone
But Jesus! why are you all unseen
On whom our lamplight shone?

The slinking dead, the shrinking sands,
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

(Voice)

Eyes on the cloth. Eyes on the plate.
Rigor mortis straightens the figure.
Striking the clock when the hands are straight,
You have seen a god in the eyes of the beggar.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

(Faint)

'O white is the frost on the breath-bleared panes
And the starlike fire within,
And our Mari is white in her starry reins
Starved through flesh and skin
It is a skull we carry
In the ribbons of a bride.
Bones of the Nightfrost parry
Bones of the Fire inside.'

(Loud and near)

'None can look out and bear that sight,
None can bear that shock.
The Mari's shadow is too bright,
Her brilliance is too black.
None can bear that terror
When the pendulum swings back
Of the stiff and stuffed and stifled thing
Gleaming in the sack.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.

END

Pronunciation Note

In case there should be confusion over the pronunciation of certain names in the Ballad, the following approximate pronunciations are given:

| | | |
|---------------|---|--|
| Mari Lwyd | - | 'Marry Loo-id' |
| Gruffydd Bryn | - | 'Griffith (<i>th</i> soft) Brin' |
| Machynlleth | - | 'Machúnlleth' (<i>ch</i> guttural; <i>ll</i> and <i>th</i> aspirated) |
| Caerphilly | - | <i>ll</i> as in English |
| Kidwelly | - | <i>ll</i> as in English |
| Dolgelley | - | <i>ll</i> aspirated, as in Machynlleth |
| Calgarw | - | 'Calgarroo' |

Note on the Mari Lwyd

Mari Lwyd—the Grey Mari, the Grey Mare—was, by tradition in Wales, carried from house to house on the last night of the year. It was a horse's skull. Sometimes it was supplanted by a copy, a white or grey horse's head modelled in wood, painted and hung with ribbons, but in all examples of the true tradition the skull itself was used. The skull had been chosen and buried when the horse died, and the burial-place marked, so that it could be exhumed for the ceremony. After it, the skull was kept, and used again on the next thirty-first of December, and so year after year.

The carriers were usually a party of singers, wits and impromptu poets, who, on the pretext of blessing, boasting of the sanctity of what they carried, tried to gain entrance to a house for the sake of obtaining food and drink. The method they used was to challenge those within to a rhyming contest. The inmates could keep them out so long as they were not in want of a rhyme, but when they failed to reply to the challenger the right of entry was gained. The singers would then bring their horse's head in, lay it on the table, and eat and drink with the losers of the contest.

This ancient custom, traceable perhaps to the White Horse of Asia, is still prevalent in many parts of Wales. The singers came every year to my father's house; and listening to them at midnight, I found myself imagining a skull, a horse's skull decked with ribbons, followed and surrounded by all kinds of drunken claims and holy deceptions.

I have attempted to bring together those who are separated. The last breath of the year is their threshold, the moment of supreme forgiveness, confusion and understanding, the profane and sacred moment impossible to realise while the clock hands divide the Living from the Dead.

VERNON WATKINS

